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If It Wasn't for That Umlaut ...

By ERIC ASIMOV
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GRÜNER VELTLINER is one of summer's great, unlikely pleasures.

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FROM HERE TO YOUR BACKYARD
The Wachau region of Austria produces the rich and multi-talented grüner veltliner wines.

Tasting Report: Grüner Veltliners, the Quiet Austrians

As eager as we were to embrace the wines, the tasting was somewhat disquieting. While we very much liked our favorites, we found too many wines that were not up to snuff.

- 1. Domäne Wachau
- 2. Prager Wachau
- 3. Birgit Eichinger
- 4. Alzinger Wachau
- 5. Graff Hardegg
- 6. Büchegger Kremstal
- 7. Hiedler Kamptal
- 8. E.&M. Berger Kremstal
- 9. Anton Bauer Wagram
- 10. Summerer Kamptal

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vintage, which has the reputation of being good to grüner, and one from 2008. For the

Why unlikely? Well, it may seem shallow, but Americans have always been riveted by the mellifluous, flowing wine names drawn of the romance languages — the chardonnays, pinot grigios and Sancerres. Germanic terms, with their umlauts and consonant pileups, have historically posed obstacles, whether gewürztraminer, blaifränkisch (its alternate name, lemberger, is no better) or the ever-popular trockenbeerenauslese.

Yet grüner veltliner from Austria has not only survived but prospered on restaurant lists across the country. It's one of those happily inexplicable things. Years ago I never would have guessed that Americans would fall in love with raw fish, but now sushi bars are everywhere.

One possible reason for grüner veltliner's popularity is that, unlike riesling, it does not have to overcome the assumption that it's sweet. Sure, sweet grüner veltliners are produced, very good ones in fact. But they are the exception. Consumers can be confident when they order a bottle that it will be dry.

Another is the wine itself. Grüner veltliner can range from crisp and light-bodied to rich and full-bodied, with aromas and flavors of lemon and grapefruit, flowers and herbs. Perhaps its most distinctive feature is a peppery spiciness. Good examples can also have a minerality.

Across the stylistic board, though, a dry grüner veltliner should have a refreshing tanginess, borne of good acidity. All told, a good grüner veltliner goes wonderfully with many foods.

As for the name, Americans have found several methods of sliding by. Most common is simply truncating the name, calling it grüner (and softening it to GROO-ner rather than the more correct, diacritical GREWH-ner), and dispensing with the ungainly veltliner (pronounced FEHLT-lee-ner). Some call it simply G.V., and occasionally you'll find sommeliers and industry people who use the insiderish term gru-ve, pronounced "groovy."

With high expectations of summer meals happily accompanied by glistening bottles of grüner veltliner, the wine panel recently sampled 19 bottles from the 2007

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tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Belinda Chang, wine director at the Modern, and David Lynch, who recently left his position as general manager at the John Dory to take a job as wine director at Quince in San Francisco.

As eager as we were to embrace the wines, the tasting was somewhat disquieting. While we very much liked our favorites, we found too many wines that were not up to snuff. Some were ponderous and heavy, too big with not enough zesty acidity. A few of the big ones had detectable sweetness, a style that Belinda called “Alsace grüner,” after the wines from Alsace that can unpredictably have a bit of residual sugar. Others seemed simply wan and lacked snap.

“When a good grüner really delivers, it has depth,” David said. “A lot just lacked acidity.”

Belinda wondered whether some of our disappointment was a result of high expectations.

Perhaps so, but the wines we liked best certainly were as good as anticipated. There was no disputing our favorite, the Domäne Wachau Federspiel Terrassen, which had all the balance we were hoping to find, along with pure, deep, complex flavors.

As you might guess, Domäne Wachau is in the Wachau region of Austria, which produces the country’s richest wines; in the best bottles, though, the richness comes without weight and heft. Wachau alone uses a specific terminology for the ripeness at which the grapes are harvested.

A federspiel wine, like our No. 1, is harvested at the medium ripeness level. The ripest Wachau wines are called smaragd (pronounced shmar-AHGD), and they also tend to be the most expensive. Indeed the two Wachau smaragds in our top 10, the Prager Achleiten and the Alzinger Mühlpoint, were by far the most expensive of our favorites. Both had a crystalline purity and a peppery, mineral richness, with underlying citrus, floral and mineral flavors.

The other leading grüner veltliner regions are Kamptal and Kremstal, sources of 5 of our top 10 bottles. While these may not have the richness of the Wachau smaragds, they are not necessarily slender wines, though our No. 3 bottle, the Birgit Eichinger Hasel from Kamptal, was beautifully weightless, with refreshing, tangy flavors. But both the Büchegger Holzgasse from Kremstal and the Hiedler Thal from Kamptal were substantial, balanced, delicious wines.

Some of the best values come from other regions. The Graff Hardegg Veltlinsky, a \$14 bottle, had a lovely texture, with flavors of citrus, flowers and minerals. It comes from the Weinviertel region, although the label cannot say so officially because the wine carries a brand name, Veltlinsky. Speaking of values, the liter bottle for \$13 from E.&M. Berger is a perennial. It’s not a complex wine, but it is satisfying.

All good, right? Well, let’s not forget those disappointing bottles. Some were rich wines that were also fatiguing, as if some producers were aiming for smaragd-level ripeness without the balance that keeps a big wine refreshing. They were heavy-handed, while a good grüner veltliner should have an almost electric jolt of bracing acidity.

I’m hesitant to make this comparison, but the tasting reminded me of what has happened with some New Zealand sauvignon blancs. These wines have achieved tremendous popularity in the last 25 years, but of late I can’t help but sense that some producers are not taking particular care in making their wines. Instead they treat the genre like a cash cow, confident that cachet will triumph over a lack of effort.

I don’t think grüner veltliner producers have strayed that far, but compared with previous tastings I do sense a falloff. With a little more attention to balance, perhaps all will be groovy again.

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BEST VALUE

Domäne Wachau Grüner Veltliner

\$15

★★★ 1/2

Federspiel Terrassen 2007

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Pure, deep, balanced and refreshing with complex citrus, spice and herbal aromas and flavors. (Importer: Vin DiVino, Chicago)

Prager Wachau Grüner Veltliner

\$56

★★★

Smaragd Achleiten 2007

Bright and rich with classic peppery minerality. (Vin DiVino)

Birgit Eichinger Kamptal

\$17

★★★

Grüner Veltliner Hasel 2007

Light-bodied and tangy, with lingering flavors of grapefruit and white pepper. (Weygandt-Metzler, Unionville, Pa.)

Alzinger Wachau Grüner Veltliner

\$45

★★ ½

Mühlpoint Smaragd 2007

Bold and assertive with rich aromas and flavors of flowers, pepper and lemon. (Terry Theise/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Graff Hardegg Grüner Veltliner

\$14

★★ ½

Veltlinsky 2007

Balanced, with aromas and flavors of grapefruit, flowers and minerals. (Monika Caha Selections/Frederick Wildman & Sons, New York)

Büchegger Kremstal

\$17

★★ ½ Grüner Veltliner Holzgasse 2007

Rich and balanced with spicy citrus flavors.(Weygandt-Metzler)

Hiedler Kamptal

\$20

★★ ½

Grüner Veltliner Thal 2007

Rich and savory with flavors of lemon and white pepper.

(Terry Theise/Michael Skurnik Wines)

E.&M. Berger Kremstal

\$13

★★

Grüner Veltliner 2008 1 liter

Spicy, with aromas and flavors of flowers, citrus and peach.

(Terry Theise/Michael Skurnik Wines)

Anton Bauer Wagram

\$19

★★

Grüner Veltliner 2007

Nicely textured with straightforward flavors of citrus and white pepper. (Prescott Wines, New York)

Summerer Kamptal Grüner Veltliner

\$24

★★

Schenkenbichl 2007

Balanced with aromas of flowers and peaches.

(Savio Soares Selections/Willette Wines, New York)

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 15, 2009

The Wines of The Times column last Wednesday, about grüner veltliners, and a list of the wines that were tasted, misstated the vintage of one, the grüner veltliner that from E. & M. Berger Kremstal. It was a 2008, not a 2007.

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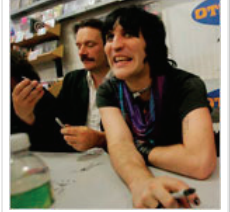
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